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SUBJECT: MUSLIM IMMIGRANT CHALLENGES IN SWEDEN: INFORMAL  
BARRIERS TO EMPLOYMENT IS THE KEY

REF: A. A) STOCKHOLM 1487 ("INTEGRATION MINISTER: SWEDEN  
LAGS BEHIND U.S.")  
1B. B) STOCKHOLM 1448 ("COMPARING THE SWEDISH AND  
AMERICAN IMMIGRANT RECORDS: THE SOMALI  
EXPERIENCE")

SUMMARY

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1. (U) In Gothenburg on January 24-25, the DCM met with city officials and Muslim community leaders to discuss integration. Immigrants comprise nearly one quarter of Gothenburg's population of half a million. Most live in segregated neighborhoods on the city's northern outskirts, and crime and radicalization are significant and growing problems. Muslim immigrant leaders and city officials told the DCM that informal barriers to employment represent the greatest integration challenge, with unemployment rates approaching 80 percent for some population groups. END SUMMARY.

THE ISLAMIC SCHOOL: CATALYST FOR INTEGRATION OR ISOLATION?  
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2. (U) In Gothenburg, the DCM presented the IIP-Scholastic book collection "My Arabic Library" to Romosseskolan, a private Islamic K-9 school that was established in 1998 in a predominantly immigrant suburb of the city. The school is at the center of a debate about whether separate Islamic schools help young Muslims integrate or further isolate them from Swedish society at large. Most of the school's more than 300 students are Sunni, children of immigrants from Somalia and Iraq. It is one of a half dozen Islamic schools in Sweden, and like most other private schools in the country, receives significant government funding.

3. (U) During a roundtable discussion on integration at Romosseskolan, Abdirisak Waberi, the school's Somali immigrant headmaster and the spokesman of Sweden's Islamic Association, said Muslim families send their children to the school to avoid the harassment they often face in public schools for wearing a veil and other expressions of religious identity. He said the school offers a Swedish curriculum "with a foundation in Islamic values" and helps Muslim youth to integrate by providing a "safe space" for them to develop their identities as both Muslim and Swedish. A representative of the student body was less hopeful. She said being both Muslim and Swedish is "a big problem" for her because of how Muslims are perceived by non-Muslims. She said she feels comfortable at the Islamic school because her peers respect her religious expression, she can speak Somali and Arabic with her classmates, and she does not feel compelled to "fit in" to Swedish society.

4. (U) Critics of separate schools for Muslims, including Sweden's National Teacher Association and Integration

Minister Nyamko Sabuni, argue that Islamic schools compound the problem of youth alienation by completing a circle of exclusion in which children from segregated Muslim neighborhoods attend segregated schools, reducing opportunities for them to interact with non-Muslims and increasing the risk of radicalization.

"NEW SWEDES" FACE INFORMAL BARRIERS TO INTEGRATION  
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¶5. (U) Sweden has welcoming asylum and immigration policies, strong legal protections against discrimination, and offers generous welfare benefits. These policies have been credited with keeping tensions in check, helping Sweden to avoid the social unrest experienced by some other European countries. A recent study by the British Council and the Migration Policy Group ranked Sweden best at integrating foreigners. However, immigrants face high barriers to employment and often live in segregated neighborhoods. Generous benefits have led to welfare dependency, raising questions about how sustainable the "Swedish model" is, particularly in the event of an economic downturn (reftel a).

¶6. (U) On January 24, the DCM lead a roundtable discussion on integration with Muslim community leaders hosted by Bill Werngren, the city's Head of Public Relations and Director of the Election Committee. Participants pointed to employment as the most important gateway to integration. Ashar Khan, a young Swedish-born Muslim who recently started a diversity consultancy in Gothenburg, said informal barriers, including hiring discrimination against applicants with Muslim names or foreign accents, represent the greatest concern.

¶7. (U) Other Muslim participants said Sweden has been less successful at integration than the U.S. in part because

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Swedish identity is less inclusive. Abdirisak Waberi said "the American dream is universal" and immigrants to the U.S. are quickly accepted as Americans, but immigrants to Sweden "will never feel Swedish," creating a sense of alienation. Solutions proposed by participants included lowering employment barriers for immigrants and challenging the public silence in Sweden on the topic of integration with increased dialogue.

"SWEDEN, WE HAVE A PROBLEM"  
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¶8. (SBU) The discontent immigrant community leaders expressed at the discrimination faced by Muslim job seekers was matched by the frustration of city officials who, in the words of one official, feel that 30 years of programs aimed at integrating Muslim immigrants "have not worked." When first approached about plans to include meetings on integration in the program for the DCM's visit to Gothenburg, Bill Werngren sent EmbOff a series of articles in Goteborg's-Posten, the local newspaper of record, profiling integration challenges among the city's Somali immigrant community (reftel b). In a cover note, Werngren wrote that the situation in Gothenburg reminded him of the phrase "Houston, we have a problem" and described the articles as "interesting and quite horrible reading."

¶10. (U) Werngren welcomed the visit as a vehicle for engaging community leaders in dialogue. In a follow-up conversation, Werngren told EmbOff that the visit created an opportunity for city officials to discuss integration with Muslim community leaders "in a more serious way" and had already resulted in a new partnership between the municipality and several young Muslims who participated in the program.

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